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LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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Sister Rachel John, of the Bethel Ashram, Patpara, M.P. India, is one of four missionaries sent by the Central Travancore Diocese of the Church of South India to do work of evangelism among the Gonds of Central India. She sends us the following description of her work.

MISSION TO THE GONDS OF INDIA

Mission to Gonds began in the year 1842, when Pastor Gossner of Berlin sent six brave men into the thickest part of the jungle of Central India, where the Gonds, who are one of the aboriginal tribes of India, live. The lives of four of those missionaries were sacrificed in the same year. Thirty-seven years later the Church Missionary Society sent its first missionary to the Gonds. Between then and 1939, trememdous man power and money were expended out here by C.M.S. Following the work of the C.M.S. missionaries, missionaries from South India came, working under the financial and official administration of the Nagpur Diocese. Work, however, was reduced, so that now the whole area is in charge of a single pastor.

The challenge to take up the evangelistic work among Gonds began to rise from the Nagpur Diocese, and finally in 1954 the youth of the Central Travancore Diocese of the Church of South India, responded to the call. After much prayer and thought a group of four members was sent to live in Patpara and do evangelistic work. This work is based on ashram principles, which means witnessing through community living and preaching.

We came here in early winter. The whole place looked desolate, buildings were falling down and everywhere there were wild bushy growths which provided shelter for wild animals. Living together at first in the former dispensary building, we began to cut down the bushes and clean and repair the buildings to make them habitable. As the people were busy working in their own fields, it was difficult to get help to do these things. It was not for two months that the Bethel Ashramites could start living under a separate roof. Meanwhile we all tried to learn the language and make friends with the people.

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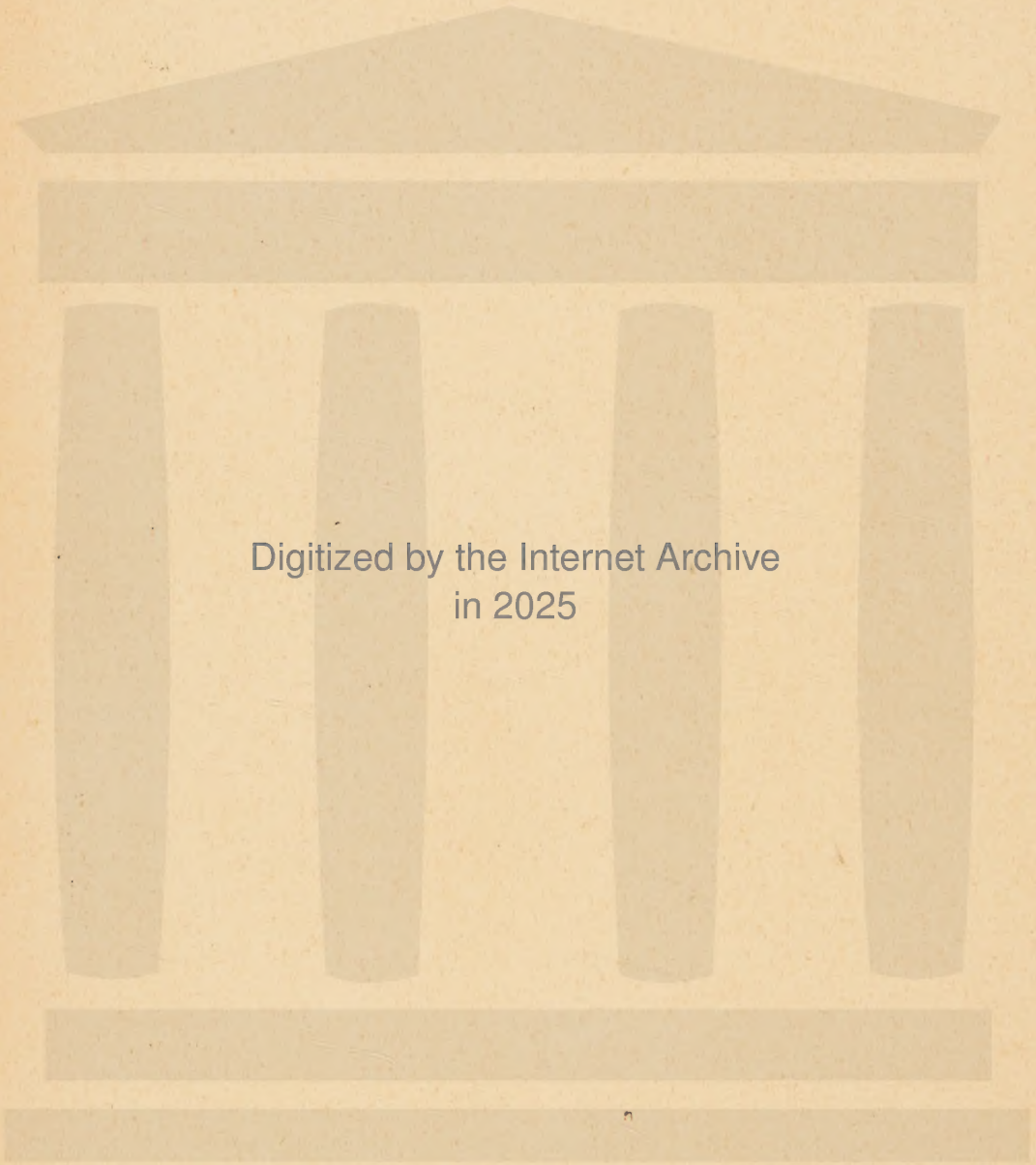

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Gonds are a peculiar people. They live in villages, which are one or two or three miles and some even fifteen or twenty miles apart from one another, in thick jungles, hill tops and valleys. They are still very primitive. Those living nearer to the towns are somewhat civilized, but if you go to the interior you can find almost naked people who live on tree tops eating whatever they come across in the jungle. They are quite strong and sturdy. Gonds are agricultural and pastoral people, but they revel in hunting and fishing. They have their own language. There is the caste system amongst them also. They are very ignorant and superstitious. There is very little desire for learning. The Mission Schools constantly had to struggle for existence. Certain caste Gonds do not allow their girls to be educated. Drunkenness and immorality are very common. Their religion is a mixture of hinduism and animism. Some worship devils and live under the constant fear of evil spirits and the forces of nature. They perform magic with the help of devils and believe in exorcism and sorcery. If anything extraordinary happens to them, they think it is due to the wrath of their gods. They offer sacrifice to their gods and sometimes get wedded to the gods and godesses.

It is with gratitude that we watch how the spirit of Christ works among these people. The way for the Gospel to accomplish its work was opened by our Lord in sending sick people to us from the very beginning. As we did not know the language in the early stage, we paid more attention to the sick, and we took that opportunity to tell them about our Lord. The Gonds do not care for the sick very much and it seems as though they do not have any faith that their illness could be cured. There was one boy who was full of sores who used to walk about in filthy rags and everybody said that he would never get rid of his sores. One day he came to us to sell eggs. We found his eyes sore and tried to drop some medicine into them. He would not allow us to do that and he said it was like that always and that he did not want to get better. We applied medicine with force and asked him to come the next day, which he did not do. Then we had to find him out, and we had to fight with him to get his sores cleaned, medicated and properly bandaged. We went to his house, and sprinkled D.D.T. on his clothes and bed and boiled and washed his clothes. This we did for a few days continuously and gradually he began to get better. Ever since then, whenever he gets any sores he comes to us. Now he is in good condition and earns his livelihood. Not only people in his home, but others also have seen the change in him and some have asked us to give them the medicine that we gave to the boy.

The wife of a village chief was suffering from mental disease. She came to us and behaved very abnormally but at the same time she told us that she would like to get rid of her illness. She said that she had made many sacrifices in various places and still it was not better. We told her about Jesus Christ and said that if she prayed to Him in faith He would answer her prayers. We taught her a small prayer and whenever she came to us (which she used to do regularly) we prayed with her too. We also gave her some medicine. By the grace of God she became normal after a few months and now attends our church and comes to us to hear the Gospel. But we have to go on praying for her, that she may find Jesus as her Saviour and accept Him, leaving all her old gods, for this is her great difficulty, since it would mean that she would have to face persecution from her people.

Gonds are very ignorant in bringing up their young ones, especially when the mother is not well or dead. Perhaps they do not understand the value of human life. After the birth of the child, the mothers do not get proper attention, and many are paralysed or die. Very few motherless children survive. We were sent for from a village and the message said that a woman was very ill after giving birth to a boy. We could not do much for her. She died on the third day and the little child was left in a corner, uncared for. Her relatives ran away, thinking that the wrath of god was upon their house and that it was better to escape from that before somebody else would die. We felt that we should offer to look after the child for a few months and then give him back to the father. So the child was brought to us. But his people did not want to bother to bring him up, and therefore left him with us, saying that we could bring him up as a Christian. So Susheel Jacob is now a part of our family. Pray that he may grow up to be a good Christian and win many to Christ. We are able to help quite a few by feeding young babies with bottles (that is unknown to them) and also by educating them to give good food to the mothers and to the sick. It is by doing these practical things that we often get opportunities to preach the Gospel.

Another time when we were visiting a village, we were called into a house where a man had been stricken by fever for the past three months. He had been taken to the hospital and was not better. We read the Gospel to him and prayed with him and asked him to believe and pray to our Lord for health. He was very keen about it and wanted to put into his memory the name of our Lord. When we were in that house a good crowd gathered there, and ever since that when these villagers pass by us they ask us to go to their village.

Daily we go out to the villages around us to preach the Gospel. We do house to house preaching and also to groups. Pictures, flanel graphs, magic lantern and wayside pulpit are all helps for our work. We come across Sadhus, who come to visit their holy river the Narbudha. One Sadhu is spending this rainy season in Patpara, our village, and so we are using the opportunity to teach him the Gospel. May God help him to find the way of salvation.

There is a small Christian congregation of five families in Patpara. With them we pray and worship, and there are prayer meetings and Mothers Union meetings for them. It is a sad truth that the Christians are not deeply rooted in Christ and that all the vices of the heathen are in them also. Would you remember them in your prayers?

We are making an effort to become a self-supporting community. We are using the land for paddy cultivation and we have our own vegetable gardens too. We work in them with the workers from the village.

We can never forget the protecting arm of our God. Our houses can be opened by anyone at any time and there are snakes and wild animals round about. We have seen and heard them often but by the grace of God we were never hurt by them so far.

One is often tempted to do good works for and among the heathen and thus present our Lord to them. But is it not true that merely by kind works alone, people will very seldom come to our Lord? When God provides us with the soil, whether it is by bringing the sick or the suffering or the ignorant to us, we should be ready to sow the seed of His Word.